

Matthew 10.24-39

In today's gospel, Jesus instructs his followers about the cost of discipleship. Christianity just is not an easy life, he seems to say. Just before where our reading began this morning, he's said that ***"in fact, you may be handed over to councils who will flog you, dragged before governors and kings, betrayed by your family, and hated by all because of the very name of Jesus."***

It's not easy listening – who really wants to hear the words that ***"children will rise against parents and have them put to death"***? Surely that's not what being a Christian is about, is it?

But, Jesus' words catch the attention of those listening to him —and ours— and he goes on to say some things that are a bit more comforting: Do not fear death, for though the forces of evil may kill the body they cannot kill the soul. And he gives that beautiful image of the sparrow, worth half a penny each, is cared for and loved by God. Every sparrow. And every hair on your head. Cared for and loved by God.

What Jesus is doing here is to lay out two fundamental principles of Christianity: First, we are not spared from suffering, and, second, when we suffer God suffers along with us. I'd like us to think a bit more deeply about these two.

**First, suffering:** we may not be flogged before governors or hated by everyone—but we do struggle, don't we? We contract diseases, grieve the death of loved ones, lose jobs, and undergo a myriad of nasty experiences—some trivial, and some catastrophic. And part of what Jesus seems to be saying in this passage is that we will most probably continue to suffer throughout our lives. The Christian life is not a magic fix to the woes of this mortal life.

It would be wonderful if there were no suffering: Imagine: No war in Ukraine or South Sudan; no refugees drowning in our seas; no one unable to afford to have energy in their homes, or food on the table; no one suffering abuse; where there is a lack of tolerance of those with differing views; ... A world without suffering is a beautiful picture and it is a picture of the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God, that we hope and pray for; it's what Jesus came to earth to proclaim was coming, but it's not yet here. So how are we to live in this world where hate and violence seem so rampant? The answer is simple: we need the help of God.

**And that's the second point: our God is with us. "He shall be called Emmanuel, God with us"**—remember that from Christmas? The promise made by Jesus is that we are not alone in our struggles. God is here, to comfort us, to help us through the difficult times, to show us the way when we don't know where to turn, to help us when we cannot help ourselves—and certainly to rejoice with us in good times. We will sometimes suffer in our earthly life, but God is with us—to comfort and guide us.

Perhaps we might think of these two things when we consider the many current situations that we seem to be entwined in—whether in the church, in our nation, in the world maybe even in our families and communities.

Voices on both sides of every issue want resolution—they want to be out of the struggle, for it to end. Whether it's over the war in Ukraine, understandings of human sexuality in the Church of England, or the way we do things in our families or our own churches, or anything else where there is conflict and disagreement..... when people seek to solve the problem, so often the aim is for one side, and one side alone, to be the winner and everyone else to be the loser. And yes, we should seek resolution where there is suffering and where there is no peace. But perhaps Jesus is calling us to look at this differently. Not to look to be on the 'winning side', setting out our stall with arguments to justify why we, and we alone, are in the right. But instead, for us to set ourselves in the midst of suffering and struggle. And could it be **PTO**

that, once we accept our place in the very midst of it, the Holy Spirit could show us the way forward in a new and different way?

That's, at least, how Jesus seems to imagine it. We will all have opinions of our own. But we should be interested in opposing views — hearing them and respecting them. Jesus' way of dealing with struggle and suffering seems to say that we must not dare to presume that our view is the right view—or the only view. In our struggles, whether as a church, a community, a family, an individual, a nation, we are called not to engage in a fight to the finish, in which one group winds up the victorious insiders and other the dejected outsiders. But instead, we are called to proclaim to everyone on God's earth that God is here, in the midst of us. And to share with every human being—our fellow pilgrims on the journey—the love that we have known in Christ Jesus- rather than create space for hatred to rear its ugly head.

So, when we find ourselves in a place of struggle or suffering, or in the midst of an argument, Jesus encourages us to stop and reflect. To listen out for God, to see where he is and join with him. This might mean admitting that we are wrong or accepting that there is no single 'right' way to look at things and that we need to be gracious and forgiving to others. It might mean that we need to keep from seeking to blame others for our misfortunes. It means that as we discover God's way through these situations that we are called to love, in a deep, Christlike way. Most of all, Jesus reminds us that at times of struggle and suffering we are never abandoned, that God is with us, keeping watch over us.